

REFLECTIONS ON *Growth* Number 9, October 2005

Teaching—the Dominating Passion of Our Lives

A recent letter written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to a National Spiritual Assembly emphasizes that believers, “having dedicated an enormous amount of time and energy towards studying a sequence of courses aimed at helping them carry out certain acts of service . . . should now strive to apply what they have learned in the teaching field.” This issue of the newsletter is replete with stories that vividly illustrate the confidence, skill, and success in teaching that result when the believers translate their learning into effective teaching practice. The firsthand accounts of the friends also underline the importance of prayer and of reaching known contacts so that opportunities for meaningful teaching encounters are created.

These anecdotal experiences are but a few of the exhilarating reports streaming in that typify the groundswell of intensive and systematic teaching activity under way in advanced clusters on all continents. Encapsulating courage, perseverance, and the assurance of divine confirmation, the examples provide valuable insights for learning how to meet the challenge of setting “in motion a pattern of activity which integrates individual initiative and community endeavor in order to embrace an ever-wider circle of people and teach receptive souls.”

REACHING OUT TO NEIGHBORS

Home visits are not only proving effective in applying the learning from the sequence of courses but, especially where focused in one’s neighborhood, are resulting in profound teaching experiences.

Slovakia

One believer offered these insights following a home visit to a friend of her husband.

We talked about different subjects for some time and then she said, “Good, and now tell me about your Faith. For a long time I have been willing to belong somewhere.” My husband and I took turns sharing information, and at what seemed like an appropriate point, invited her into the Faith in a similar manner set out in Ruhi Institute Book 6 with the characters of “Anna” and “Emilia.” We told her that the Bahá’í Faith is here for everyone and if she believes that Bahá’u’lláh is a Messenger of God and wants to live by His Teachings and spread His Message, she can join the community anytime and we will only be too happy.

What seemed absurd to me a few days ago was now very natural—to invite a person into the Faith that I have met only for the second time in my life. I had not planned it at all, but my inner voice gave me a simple and clear command, “Do it!” I felt closeness between our souls from the beginning. And do you know what she said after a little while? “Then I would like to join you.”

Maryland, United States

The report of an intensive home visit campaign, which resulted in a number of declarations, revealed that the strongest receptivity to the Faith came from people within the close neighborhood of the participants.

The greatest learning in this second cycle seems to be the Bahá'ís' own discovery that approaching their neighbors is something they can do and enjoy. This experience has also taught us that there is a need for a much greater continuing presence in the neighborhood.

Nordic cities

A series of home visit campaigns was carried out and elicited the following reflections from those involved.

- “I was nervous but it proved not to be difficult and will be easy from now on.”
- “Knowing the exact purpose of making the visit made it easy.”
- “I had been thinking of making a home visit—now I have done it and am determined to continue.”
- “Sensitivity and flexibility are important in relation to the needs of those visited.”
- “What had appeared to be shocking and impossible in our country proved to be quite possible.”
- “People are yearning for such visits and are ready to discuss prayers.”
- “It is important that the purpose is so clearly defined, underlining that this is not a social visit.”

London, England

Testimonials from institute participants in intensive teaching campaigns express the confidence that comes from applying what they have learned in the teaching field.

- “It feels so organic. It's becoming normal to share prayers with friends—it is very powerful and uplifting, and I no longer feel self-conscious or apologetic about offering to share a prayer.”
- “I learned that when I invite people and they don't accept, the world has not ended. And they are still my friends!”

ATTRACTING CONFIRMATIONS THROUGH AUDACITY AND CREATIVITY

The institute process is assisting participants to seize opportunities to teach that they might not otherwise have recognized or had the confidence to do.

Jaipur, India

One believer decided to approach his students at a technical training center after being inspired at a conference held to promote the institute process in his area. He had never before thought of involving his pupils in the Faith. He began by introducing them to prayers and later

to the idea of study circles. Initially, five students began a Book 1 study circle held after regular school hours for two hours a day. The second day the number rose to twelve. Six completed the full sequence of courses and two are now tutors facilitating study circles for nineteen other students on a daily basis.

London, England

A young couple, expecting a baby, announced to their antenatal class that they were Bahá'ís and that they held prayer meetings in their homes for their friends. They invited the entire class to a prayer meeting dedicated to the children who were about to be born and to the new mothers.

There were 10 couples, and their reaction (as well as the reaction of the midwife) was amazing. They sounded so excited! We live five minutes from the hospital and most of the couples seem to live around that area too. So we are hopeful that they will join us, God willing!

This same new father went on to comment, “The atmosphere around us seems to be different than before. Many things are happening that usually don’t happen; people crossing our way two to three times a day, in different parts of London (as if Bahá'u'lláh is pushing them towards us!); people sitting next to us on the bus and asking if we are religious.”

Another mother in the same cluster was unable to take part in the first week of the intensive program of growth but was determined to do more the second week. She made three home visits, one to her yoga teacher who then brought eight people to her devotional meeting. She visited a Sri Lankan family who have Bahá'í relatives and was able to use part of “Anna’s” presentation. She also shared prayers with other mothers and invited them to her devotional gathering. She said that she is learning so much as this was really her first experience of teaching. “It has just been fantastic, I am bowled over with it.” She even made flyers to explain and invite the mothers from her child’s school to participate in a Book 1 study circle. This really took courage. She remarked on her anxiety, “I didn’t sleep all night. These are our own frailties, but we must not hold back others because of our own nervousness.” Three mothers attended the first session and several others have indicated a desire to join as well.

Sussex, England

The following excerpts demonstrate how the confidence gained from the institute process attracts receptive souls to the Faith.

I suddenly turned around and noticed this lady sitting alone at the table behind me reading a book. I was curious to know what she was reading, so I tilted my head a little and read, “Steps Toward An Inner Spiritual Balance.” I was laughing in my head thinking what bigger confirmation could Bahá'u'lláh have given me. I wondered what step to take next so I would not look like a crazy fool. Then I took a big breath and turned around and asked her what she was reading. The conversation then led to our speaking about the Faith for over an hour until her friend arrived. I invited them to a devotional meeting and fireside at my home that weekend, which will be followed by an invitation to join a Book 1 study circle.

The second story reflects a very valuable learning experience.

“I would really like to know more about the Bahá’í Faith,” were the exact words of a Japanese student who had expressed a very direct interest in the Faith before the intensive program of growth when I bumped into her at a bus stop. With this amazing receptivity and a real shining radiance about her, we met for coffee, and were later joined by a few other Bahá’ís. We talked about the dire state of the world at the moment, and then she asked me how we knew one another. I explained that the others were also Bahá’ís and that they previously came from different religious backgrounds. Her face lit up following this answer and she said, “So I can become a Bahá’í soon too!” This was a very important learning point for all of us, that people should not feel the Bahá’í Faith is an exclusive club. People should feel that the Faith is really open to all. We then asked her if she would like to hear “Anna’s” presentation and she happily agreed. After the presentation, which covered all the major points, we talked about the Ruhi Institute books, informing her that they are a spiritual course studied by many people in many countries around the world. Then I asked her if she would like to join a Book 1 study circle. She smiled and agreed to participate in the course, and said that she had other Japanese friends that may also be interested in joining.

Uvira, Democratic Republic of the Congo

The intrepid spirit of the believers is attracting others to the Faith. In Uvira the last reflection meeting was held 15 kilometers from the centre of the town. The locality is on a mountain and the only way to reach it is to travel three to five hours by foot. A group of soldiers saw the friends walking to the reflection meeting and asked them who they were and who a particular lady, who happened to be an Auxiliary Board member from Bukavu, was. She looked so tired of walking. The friends jokingly said to the soldiers that if they knew where they were going, the soldiers would join them. The soldiers were surprised that a lady from Bukavu, which is 120 kilometers away from Uvira, would travel all that way just to attend a meeting.

When the believers were on their way back from the meeting, they met the same soldiers who asked for some books. After some days the friends went to visit the soldiers, gave them a number of books, and taught them the Faith. The result of this teaching initiative was the declaration of 11 people—one family and a number of the soldiers.

APPLYING LESSONS FROM THE SEQUENCE OF COURSES

Many of the stories mention applying the skills learned through the study of institute courses, especially Book 6.

London, England

One believer recounted this example of sharing “Anna’s” presentation with a friend.

We asked our friend, who was already close to the Faith, whether we could do a home visit with her on Saturday morning. Since she does not feel so comfortable with her flatmates, we asked whether she could come to our home. We planned to

go through “Anna’s” presentation with her and prepared for it the night before. We were also aware that she would have questions that she would like to ask. When she came, it somehow happened that we started talking about the Faith right away and, even though we did not follow the exact same sequence as in Book 6, we were able to mention the full content of “Anna’s” presentation and a lot more. It was all very natural and intermingled with her comments and questions. It was amazing for us to see how easily one can cover all of “Anna’s” presentation in a few hours. Our friend was very happy with our discussion. She is eager to do Book 1 with us and has agreed to ask some of her friends whether they would be interested as well!

Two other believers shared the story of the life of Bahá’u’lláh from Book 4 with a lady during a home visit. The visit seemed especially blessed because the lady’s daughter, who was meant to be at university that day, was home and joined in the discussion. The mother cried as they recounted the sufferings of the Blessed Beauty and in the end both mother and daughter expressed a desire to take part in a study circle.

A third report described the beneficial impact of the institute materials on the process of a fireside.

There was such warmth and hospitality, and the new friends who were invited clearly felt relaxed and welcomed. There were six Bahá’ís and about seven seekers there. We started with a beautiful devotional. Then two of the friends shared the topics from the first part of “Anna’s” presentation in a very simple way. The discussion was really inspiring. Everyone joined in and had something useful to contribute. Far from being a question and answer session, it was friends sharing ideas. The seekers had not been to a Bahá’í meeting before, but they were fully engaged in the discussion. What really struck me was how the Bahá’ís were teaching. There was great love shown, they all listened carefully to everyone’s contribution, and the Bahá’ís never gave purely personal opinions nor said “Bahá’ís believe” or “Bahá’ís do this,” but instead they shared profound ideas using beautiful quotations that they knew from the Writings, and spoke clearly and directly about Bahá’u’lláh and His mission to unite humanity.

LEARNING ABOUT TEACHING IN TEAMS

Piarco, Trinidad and Tobago

The youth of this community were ignited through the institute process and set out to raise the call of Bahá’u’lláh. They began a direct teaching campaign visiting their neighbors to invite them to a devotional meeting and fireside. The response was very positive. They even discovered a young lady who had attended Bahá’í classes as a child but had lost contact with the Faith. Within a few weeks, because of their efforts, there were three enrollments. They have also begun a children’s class at the home of a non-Bahá’í family and took twelve of these children to a week-long Bahá’í summer school. It was reported that, “It is the activities of these youth that is giving life to the Bahá’í community.”

Nice, France

This story confirms that even when a team cannot be together, their joint prayers for the success of their teaching efforts have an effect.

I am part of a teaching team in Nice and my personal plan consisted of visiting a family of seekers, a couple, and their little girl. The mother is a believer and is close to the Faith; the father says he is an atheist. The first meeting had to be canceled, and, disappointed but confident, our team prayed for this family and stayed in contact with them. And now, only just a week ago, the mother called me and invited us for dinner. Unfortunately, the other team members were not free. It was impossible for me to go on my own. And with the permission of my hosts, I proposed to a youth passing through Côte d'Azur to accompany me, which he accepted with joy. So off we went, the two of us, Wednesday night, very nervous, him not knowing the family, me not knowing the father. I had asked the other team members who could not make it to pray for the success of this meeting. The purpose of this first meeting was to strengthen our bond and to learn more about each other. We had a fantastic evening with them in a relaxed atmosphere. All our fears disappeared once we arrived. And then the moment arrived when we talked about spirituality and religions in general. And to our surprise, the father did not want to say that he did not believe in God, and although skeptical of religion, he thought that the only force that could unite humanity was religion. According to him, the religion he felt the closest to and that seemed to him the healthiest and the most able to fulfill this objective was the Bahá'í Faith!

Sussex, England

A teaching team in the cluster experienced the galvanizing effect of praying together, making pledges to teach on a daily basis, and carrying out a diversity of actions. One team member reported his personal experiences during the campaign.

During the second week of the intensive program of growth, I woke up one morning and suddenly realized that I had no teaching plan for that day. Precious time was going to be wasted and it appeared to be too late to do anything about it.

I prayed and meditated but still nothing came to mind. So I decided to leave the house and rely on Bahá'u'lláh's assistance. While walking outside and still pleading for guidance, someone looked directly at me, smiled, and said hello. We started talking and here was my opportunity to talk about the Bahá'í Faith. This person already knew something about the Faith and had also met another Bahá'í before. He gave me his phone number and was interested to join us for a devotional meeting soon.

Later that day while shopping, a man just happened to be standing next to me for a few seconds when we said hello and started talking. Somehow the conversation led us to discuss prayer meetings and the Bahá'í Faith. We talked for a while as this person had several questions to ask. I had a prayer card with me, which I showed him. This special soul listened very carefully to everything we discussed and at the end of the conversation commented that Bahá'u'lláh has therefore put everything

that is good and spiritual from all other religions together, plus more, so that the world can be united. So we parted but said that we would meet up again soon.

What a joyful day that was for me! How precious it is to have confirmation like this that Bahá'u'lláh answers all our prayers and so quickly too.

Kiribati

During the intensive teaching phase of the last growth cycle in South Tarawa, a teaching team of women in Betio set out to meet people and teach the Faith. On one occasion they found themselves in the company of a man who was well known in the village as a hopeless alcoholic. This man had been rejected by his family, who are prominent members of their church, and had been homeless for more than thirty years. To their great credit, the Bahá'í women were not distracted by his appearance and his degraded situation. They engaged in conversation with him about Bahá'í Teachings and he was persuaded to join a Book 1 study circle. He very soon became a Bahá'í, progressed through all the books in the sequence, established his own study circle with non-Bahá'ís, and began attracting people to the Faith. All of this happened before the end of the four-month cycle. This man, completely transformed in manner and appearance, was present at the cluster reflection meeting to launch the subsequent growth cycle, and his contribution to the consultation was a source of great encouragement and inspiration.

INVITING PEOPLE INTO THE FAITH

These last stories highlight the need to be ever conscious of the many receptive souls who are waiting to be invited into the Faith.

London, England

A friend of mine recently declared. With her, the effort was gradual. Her other Bahá'í friends and I would always keep her in mind when we knew there was something she would enjoy taking part in. I think the turning point was helping her join Book 1. After that, it was just a matter of “when” rather than “if.” So of course during the campaign, we kept her in our mind and in our prayers. Another turning point was asking her, during the campaign, to offer service to Bahá'u'lláh. I am sure having that feeling was great nourishment for her soul. She prepared a presentation for the introductory part of a fireside. At that point, I told her, “I already know you are a Bahá'í, I don't even need to ask you that, or teach you. Look at you, you are teaching other people!” So she admitted it and I said, “You know you have to register since you are a Bahá'í,” and I told her how she could do it. She wanted to see the National Center, so we agreed to visit it together two days later. I told her that in the meantime I'll pray for her, and perhaps she could do the same and think about her decision to enroll in the Faith. When I saw her, she said, “Yes, I have decided to become a Bahá'í. But I won't register just now.” And from that moment on, when asked, she would answer that she is a Bahá'í. I also asked her if she had a date in mind for registering. She did have a date in mind and she stuck to that date.

Kiev, Ukraine

When we studied the Riḍván message at our cluster meeting, one of the Bahá'ís asked, "What does 'seekers' mean?" One non-Bahá'í replied, "It is me. It is me who wants to come to a study circle because I can see how my daughter who is a Bahá'í is behaving. She is nine years old and I'm proud of her. Once, while we were walking together, I asked her if she wants to be famous. She thought a little bit and answered with confidence, "Yes." I asked her why? She replied that if she becomes famous, she can tell even more people about God. There were ten other children around us and they heard our conversation and my daughter was not at all embarrassed." Later I heard that this lady, like her nine-year old daughter, also embraced the Cause.

Sussex, England

Finally, a believer describes the process of assisting a seeker, in this case, someone who had been referred by another seeker, to recognize and confirm her faith in Bahá'u'lláh.

I introduced myself and told her that I was put in touch by a friend of hers in Wales who mentioned that she was interested in learning about the Faith. She immediately agreed to see me, and I suggested Thursday, as I selfishly remembered all the appointments I had today and tomorrow. She suggested today and I agreed, as I knew you don't resist the Will of Bahá'u'lláh; you ride the wave and let Him take care of all your appointments. I invited a Bahá'í friend to come along. We shared the Tablet of Ahmad and some prayers and eagerly waited. At 12:20 p.m. I saw a lady on her bike looking at a piece of paper and knew it was her. She came in and for the next hour all of "Anna's" presentation was shared with her. We showed her pictures of the Holy Land in a large Bahá'í book and thoroughly explained the Administrative Order. We used two prayers and other quotations throughout the presentation. I noticed that she was smiling, lying back on her chair, more relaxed than before, and that she had become quiet. I was wondering what she was thinking, so I asked, "Have you been a Bahá'í for a while and you just didn't admit it?" To which she replied, "I suppose I have." I then said, "Well, if you recognize Bahá'u'lláh as a Manifestation of God for today then you are a Bahá'í." She answered, "Yes." I asked again, "Do you recognize Bahá'u'lláh as a Manifestation of God?" She replied in the affirmative. I then said, "Yes, you are a Bahá'í; can I register you today as a Bahá'í?" She agreed. We then got up and hugged each other.

Prepared under the auspices of the International Teaching Centre for the institution of the Counsellors. Extracts from the reports cited may be edited for grammar, clarity, or length. All or portions of this publication may be reproduced or distributed within the Bahá'í community without prior permission from the International Teaching Centre.